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ABSTRACT

Changes in shared decision making as a result of the implementation of school-based management in the Dade County public school system are described in this report. Background information on the school system and its restructuring plan, implemented during the 1987-88 school year, is presented, followed by a discussion of changes in participative decision making. Three focuses of the study include: (1) additional training needs of the staff; (2) efforts to enhance staff participation; and (3) revisions made since initial implementation. A survey of participating schools' principals gave rise to the following recommendations: preplanning; staff follow-up training and support; and teacher compensation commensurate with an increased workload. (LMI)

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THE CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT OF SHARED DECISION MAKING IN SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT

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Statement of Purpose

The 1987-88 school year brought radical changes to the Dade County Public School (DCPS) System. That year the notion of School-based Management (SBM) was introduced in selected schools. The purpose of this paper is to present the changes that are occurring in the shared decision making body of the SBM project over time. In order to do this, background information on the DCPS and the SBM program will be reviewed. A description of the data this paper is based upon will follow.

Description

DCPS is the fourth largest school district in the nation with 271 schools spread across a large metropolitan area. The system serves over 290,000 students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The system is growing by about 4% each school year, the result of both growth and an influx of refugees.

The concept of SBM represents a diversion of the dominant model of decision making at the school level. Traditionally, such power is in the hands of the principal. SBM seeks to involve school staff in the decision making process. This is achieved primarily through the formation of a Shared Decision Making (SDM) body. The SDM, at its most fundamental, is composed of school staff and includes teachers and other professional staff. Their task is to make decisions on various operational situations at the school.

The composition and nature of the SDM is dependent upon the individual school. In some schools, membership is comprised of representatives of the school's instructional staff. In other schools, paraprofessionals and ancillary staff (e.g., custodial and cafeteria workers) are also included. At least one administrator is included. However, whether administrative representatives have veto power on SDM decisions varies. Some schools limit decisions to those that directly affect students and curriculum. Other schools extend decision making to the overall budget and hiring of staff. Variability is also seen in the names given to the SDM.

The SDM, regardless of its name, seeks input from the staff and plans projects, that, hopefully, will have a favorable impact on students. These special projects form the second major ingredient in the formula that is school-based management. The scope and number of projects at a school also varies. They generally range from four to twelve.

The individualized approach to SBM in the school system yields even more diversity in the schools' projects. Many center on curriculum issues. Examples of this include the models to teach Spanish and computer skills. Other projects deal with organizational aspects of instruction such as scheduling classes in a more unified fashion, converting one teacher unit into four part-time teachers' aides positions, and providing increased counseling and tutoring services to students. Still others involve physical plant renovations and an in-school television system. Thus, the underlying philosophy of the SDM program at DCPS is to let the individual school determine the exact nature and extent of their program. In this manner, creativity is fostered.

Such diversity in individual programs is a direct result of the approach taken by the administration in planning the SBM. During the planning stages schools were told to "reach for the sky" and design programs based upon their "wish list". The only guidelines that were given were to create a SDM and at least one project. In some cases, workshops were held to discuss the concept of school-based management but these attempts were rudimentary and theoretical in nature. Thus, the school personnel planning their programs had no practical experience to draw upon. Planning was done in a vacuum. The result was that the first few years of the program was characterized by much refinement. For the individu-

al projects, this was a relatively easier task. For example, one school's personnel quickly saw that hallways and transportation vehicles were very overcrowded when a common dismissal time was initiated. This led to a 5-minute staggering of dismissal times the following year. In this case, evaluation was "common sense" with immediate and tangible feedback provided. The refinement process of the SDM was much more elusive and thus, posed even greater challenges to school staff. It is this refinement process, or evolution of the SDM that is the topic under study in this paper.

Methods and Findings

At the conclusion of the 1988-89 school year, schools participating in the SBM project were asked to respond to a series of questions based on the schools' past two years of experiences. Analysis of these responses formed the basis of an initial paper presented last year concerning the development of the SDM. These same questions were posed to the principals or other informed individuals in the schools the following year to track changes in the patterns of responses. Specifically, three areas of interest were, and remain under study. They are: 1) the additional training needs of the staff, 2) the efforts geared at maintaining or enhancing staff participation, and 3) the changes or refinements made to the SDM since last year.

Since the inception of the SBM program selected school staff have attended workshops each semester. These workshops attempted to meet the varied needs of staff in implementing their SBM program. The topics were varied but generally dealt with various management and evaluation topics. While some workshops were offered to everyone, generally staff had some discretion over which workshops to attend. Thus, each school's staff sought out most workshops based according to their perceived need. It should be noted that schools were given an initial grant to cover the cost of these workshops. Money was used in two ways: to cover the cost of substitute time and to bring in speakers on a given topic. In subsequent years the grant was not renewed.

This model provided maximum flexibility in choosing training sessions. But did it provide staff in the SBM schools with sufficient training? From the data analyzed this year the answer is no. Although one-third of the schools indicated they had no training needs, this left the majority of schools indicating one or more area of training they still felt was needed. The most common area of training needed by staff was in the area of professional skills. This included 7 requests for training in quality circles, 4 requests for problem solving, 3 requests for budgeting, as well as general and time management.

The second most frequently cited area of training needed was in the category referred to as interpersonal skills. Here, group relations and/or team building was mentioned by half the schools. This pattern of responses closely mirrors the findings from the previous year.

As in last year's report, it was noted that the areas most frequently cited as areas of training needs fall into categories that are not inherently covered in teacher education. Teacher education traditionally does not cover management or groups skills. By the very nature of the teacher's work setting these two areas of skills are not learned on the job. Traditionally, teachers do not take on management roles or work in groups to any great extent.

So the conclusion made last year, that teachers need great support in these areas in order to prepare them for the demands of functioning within a shared decision making framework are upheld. What is interesting to note is that this pattern of identified need remained fairly constant over the last two years. This situation may not be that surprising when membership on the SDM is rotated. However, it does point to the need of continuing support in crucial training areas.

With few exceptions, the SDM is composed of a portion of staff at a given school. As in many group situations, some individuals take on a leading role while others maintain a low profile. Schools were queried as to what efforts they made to increase the staff's involvement in SDM. Naturally, the more staff involved in SDM the lighter the workload for each person. Perhaps this is the driving philosophy behind the finding that most efforts were directed toward involving more staff in the SDM process and increasing awareness of the SDM activities. Almost two-thirds of the schools said they were concentrating efforts around this goal.

Five of the schools assigned every staff member to a committee or other specific role in the SDM as a means to enhance staff participation. To a lesser extent, schools used invitations and other forms of encouragement to attend open meetings. Some schools even held the meetings in a social setting such as a restaurant. Inservices were used in only two cases.

Compared to last year, there were fewer responses to this question suggesting a decreasing sense of urgency to get everyone involved. Part of this may be related to time; after three years of operation most staff have had the opportunity to participate in SBM in some capacity. Another explanation may be that schools are realizing that group dynamics come into play with the SDM. That is to say, not everyone wants to participate. There are usually a few individuals who do not want to get involved in the SDM project. Initially, those that did not get involved in SDM were regarded as skeptics. Gradually, there came a realization that 100% involvement is not to be expected. Indeed, at one school where there was a "mission" to engage those not involved the means to achieve this were often counterproductive. In subsequent years the SDM at that school became somewhat more accepting of this fact.

As experience in the project grew it became apparent that the SDM required extra time and effort above the traditional workload. Yet, participants in SDM do not routinely receive compensation for the extra work. Some schools have initiated modest supplements while other schools given compensatory time on teacher work days. These practices are not universal, however. This remains, therefore, a barrier to participation that is not easily remedied.

The efforts made to maintain or enhance participation in the SDM can be seen as purposeful changes to the schools' original concept of SDM. But there were other changes made in the SDM as well, based upon schools' responses to the third question under analysis here. This question asked the staff to list any change that had occurred in the SDM for the first two years of the program.

Unlike last year, over 20 of the schools stated there were no changes in the conduct of meetings. The most frequently cited changes were that the meeting time was altered and minutes were distributed faster. To a lesser extent, the locations of meetings was changed and a PTA member was added to SDM. Once again, this flattening of responses may be due to the fact that the project has been in operation for three years. Indeed, many of the "kinks" may have been worked out.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While the data presented above represents responses to three discrete questions on the cadre narrative there is much interrelatedness and overlapping. The areas of need with regard to training do impact on the methods used to maintain or enhance training do impact on the methods used to maintain or enhance staff participation which, in turn, result in adjustments made to the SDM over time. Perhaps what is most important is that a comprehensive view must be adopted when looking at the development of SDM. Therefore, the following recommendations are posited:

- 1) Pre-planning is necessary in order to provide staff with requisite skills for the functioning the shared decision making component of SBM. Staff are called upon to function as members of an administrative team in SBM and they usually do not go into it with formal training or professional experience.
- 2) Follow-up training and support is vital to the continued development, refinement and effectiveness of SBM. This is especially true for new members to staff, particularly in a growing school district.
- 3) The fact remains that teachers and other school-based personnel are asked to take on the extra work associated with SDM without an increase in compensation or a reduction in their existing workload. This fact will serve as a barrier to participation for some portion of individuals.

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